MAINE DEPARTMENT OF INLAND FISHERIES & WILDLIFE

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Bat Disease, White-Nose Syndrome, Confirmed in Maine; Not Harmful to Humans, but Deadly to Bats

AUGUSTA, Maine – The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has received confirmation that white-nose syndrome, a disease that has killed more than one million bats in eastern North America, now is in Maine.

Until this year, Maine appeared to be insulated from white-nose syndrome while states and provinces outside its borders were not. However, during surveys conducted by MDIF&W biologists this spring, bats at two sites in Oxford County displayed visible signs of white-nose syndrome fungus on their wings and muzzles. Carcasses collected from one of the sites were sent to the U.S. Geological Survey-National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin, for diagnostic evaluation for the disease, and MDIF&W recently received confirmation of the disease in Maine.

White-nose syndrome is associated with a newly discovered fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, and was given this name because, when first discovered, infected bats had white fungus on their muzzles. WNS was first documented in New York in 2006 and has since spread throughout the Northeast and Canada. Between 90 and 100 percent of hibernating bats in some hibernacula – or caves and mines where bats hibernate in the winter – in the Northeast have died from WNS.

With the addition of Maine, white-nose syndrome has been confirmed in 17 states and four Canadian provinces.

"We are saddened by the discovery of white-nose syndrome in Maine, the final New England state to confirm the presence of this devastating disease," said Jeremy Coleman, National White-Nose Syndrome Coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We will continue to work closely with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and our other partners to support research and management of the disease in Maine and across North America."

Bat species that hibernate in mines or caves are susceptible to WNS. In Maine, those species are big brown bats *(Eptesicus fuscus),* little brown bats *(Myotis lucifungus),* northern long-eared bats *(Myotis septentrionalis*), tri-colored bats (*Pipistrellus subflavus*), and eastern small-footed bats *(Myotis leibii).*

The disease is not harmful to humans, but scientists believe it is possible for humans to transport fungal spores on clothing and gear. In 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service advised

cavers and researchers to curtail caving activities and implement decontamination procedures in an effort to reduce the spread of white-nose syndrome. The fungus cannot be killed simply by washing clothing.

"Scientists are still learning about WNS, but the fungus lives in cold, damp environments and we know of no risk to humans from contact with infected bats," according to MDIF&W Wildlife Biologist John DePue.

According to DePue, Maine has only a few hibernacula, or places where bats hibernate for the winter, potentially delaying the infestation of some bats in Maine. However, the fungus associated with WNS may be passed from one bat to another even in the summer, especially when bats gather in maternity roosts. "It is possible that bats that winter in Maine spent the summer in contact with bats from WNS-infected sites in other states, and then carried the fungus back with them to their winter hibernaculum in Maine," according to DePue.

Bats play a critical role in maintaining healthy ecosystems and have an enormous impact on pest control. Therefore, bats benefit the economies of forestry and agriculture in the United States. For example, the one million little brown bats that have already died due to WNS would have eaten between 660 and 1,320 metric tons of insects in one year. A recent study published in Science estimates that insect-eating bats provide a significant pest-control service, saving the U.S. agricultural industry at least $3 billion a year.

MDIF&W is partnering with other state and federal agencies, tribes, and non-governmental organizations to monitor bat populations through pre- and post-pup rearing surveillance, and maternity emergence counts.

To help reduce the spread of white-nose syndrome, people are asked to follow these guidelines:

- Do not handle alive or dead bats.
- Do not enter caves or mines in Maine during the winter hibernation months. Disturbing bats during hibernation causes them to use limited fat reserves and could cause mortality in already health-compromised bats.
- For the most up-to-date cave and mine closures and decontamination procedures, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service White-Nose Syndrome web site: http://www.fws.gov/whitenosesyndrome
- If you have bats roosting in domestic structures, allow them to rear their pups and exit the structure at the end of the summer before closing off any entrance holes. Provide bats with a bat house for when they return next year.

For more information on white-nose syndrome in Maine, visit the MDIF&W website at www.mefishwildlife.com or send an email with your questions to ifw.webmaster@maine.gov. Or visit www.fws.gov/whitenosesyndrome or www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/white_nose_syndrome.